

Walking the Walk in Collaborative Fieldwork

Responses to Menzies, Butler, and Their Students

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With Marcela Castro Madariaga, Margaret Baurley, Molly J. Dagon, Ryan Logan, Anne Waxingmoon, and David Plasterer

Terms like *partnership* and *collaboration* have become ubiquitous in academic circles these days. While many individuals and institutions talk the talk, it is much harder to find examples of walking the walk. Charles Menzies, Caroline Butler, and their students have presented an impressive set of papers documenting their experiences doing service learning projects in a First Nations community in British Columbia. Like Menzies and Butler, I too have involved my students in a series of community collaborative projects in the very different setting of Indianapolis. Menzies and Butler's introductory remarks, along with the reflections of their students, provoked my students and me to think about how their ruminations jibe with our own experiences.

As faculty members leading a field school, Menzies and Butler make some key points that are too often overlooked in planning and executing

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community collaborative projects with students. As they note, “For an instructor, the most difficult part of a field school is finding the balance between providing a safe and supportive learning environment and allowing students to experience the true difficulties and complexities of ethnographic research.” In setting up projects in Indianapolis, I do not have the same kind of connection to neighborhoods here that Charles Menzies has with the Gixtaala Nation; therefore, I work to forge these relationships well in advance of involving students in local projects. In some cases this has led students to complain that they are getting a skewed perspective on the neighborhoods where our projects are located, in that they are relying on networks that I have established ahead of time. Because students in these courses have often not done fieldwork before, they do not understand that first of all, any genuinely collaborative project *does* require months and even years of groundwork, and second, in the time span of a semester-long weekly course, for students to participate in as many fieldwork activities as possible— including in-depth interviewing, participant observation in community settings, archival work, and mapping—it would be far more challenging, if not impossible, for each of them to accomplish individually as much work as we collectively produce in such a short period of time. I find that many of my colleagues in the

academy who have embraced the notion of service learning similarly underestimate the extent to which community collaboration requires huge investments of their time before, during, and after the project. (And it is also fair to say that many service learning projects do not even pretend to embrace the value of collaboration.)

Among the many other trenchant comments Menzies and Butler make about the nature of this kind of research is their observation that academics' claims of being "invited" into a community to do research are often overblown. As they note, "Being invited, we would suggest, is more a measure of a community's organization and history than an award of honor bestowed upon a researcher." I concur fully with this important observation, and in fact I would hesitate to claim that I was ever spontaneously "invited" into any of the communities where I have done fieldwork, either with or without students. These relationships emerged as a consequence of long and deep conversations, which, as Menzies and Butler aptly put it, "lead to research connecting the desires of the researcher with the needs and expectations of the community." I have made proposals for student projects to various kinds of local organizations; in most cases, they have responded with enthusiasm, but I am in agreement that to characterize these reactions as "invitations" overstates the case.

The field school compilation by Menzies and Butler and their students is a critical piece because it strips away the romanticism of collaborative fieldwork to show how, as is the case with any other human affiliation, this bond is forged through extended processes of give and take, compromise, and sometimes accommodations (on both sides). The starry-eyed presentations of such research endeavors in some of the current academic literature—as a magical seamless coming together of researcher and community—are not only unrealistic; they are often self-serving on the part of the institution and/or the researcher.

In thinking about the work of Menzies and colleagues, I asked six of my students to reflect on their own research experiences. The projects that these students and I have undertaken in Indianapolis have been quite different from those carried out in Gitxaala Nation; nonetheless, all the students found commonalities with Menzies and Butler's students. In the comments that follow, students Margaret Baurley and Molly Dagon comment on a project they were involved in, in which we partnered with the relatively newly formed Community Heights Neighborhood Organization on Indianapolis's Eastside. Our final product was a small book produced for the community titled *Eastside Story: Portrait of a Neighborhood on the Suburban Frontier*. Not every successful partnership need emerge from a

situation of deprivation or clear social need, and indeed this project was based in a neighborhood that on the surface seemed stable and middle class, with its neat rows of brick bungalows. In contrast to Menzies's well-placed concerns about students engaging in "cultural tourism," for those of us who teach methods classes in our own home locales, especially in public universities like mine where a high percentage of our students grew up in Indianapolis or in nearby environs, our challenge is to show students how any setting can become an interesting and challenging site for the execution of intellectually engaging fieldwork.

Our more recent project "The Neighborhood of Saturdays: Memories of a Multi-ethnic Neighborhood on Indianapolis' Southside" is addressed by Ryan Logan, Marcela Castro Madariaga, David Plasterer, and Anne Waxingmoon. For this project students have been working on creating a historical ethnography of a neighborhood that flourished from the turn of the twentieth century up to the early 1970s, when it was disrupted by the construction of Interstate 70. Prior to that time the neighborhood was a gateway to Indianapolis, both for European immigrants and, beginning in the 1920s, for African Americans migrating from the South as well as from other Midwestern cities.

As Menzies and Butler's students did, I believe my students have also

found these experiences profoundly unsettling and transformative. In their comments they have used the excellent papers published in this volume as a lens through which to refract their own experiences doing fieldwork. In doing collaborative research, the potential for the conversations to continue is limitless.

Butterflies, Past and Present: Response to Roth

Marcela Castro Madariaga

The first time we met the former residents of the near Southside of Indianapolis, I was lost. I remember not knowing what to say, how to act, or where to go. The truth was that I had all these preconceived notions about how they were going perceive me. Once we stood up in front of the community members and said our names, I was relieved. At the end of the presentation, different members of the community came and introduced themselves to us. They heard that I was from Argentina, and that brought back memories of their own travels, and of their ideas about my home country. While talking to the members of the community, I started understanding the concept of building trust.

The reflection by Solen Roth underlines the importance of our impact on the communities where we work. As researchers, we collaborate with

people to create a product that offers useful information for both the researcher and the community. We spend hours interviewing and doing archival research. We go to their houses, and they come to our meetings. The information is constantly flowing both ways. We are not a fly on the wall; rather, as Roth writes, we are the butterflies. We will never be someone from the community, since we do not share the same past, but we continue to affect each other's present and future. If I have learned anything from my field methods class, it is that although I will go home at the end of the semester, and in a year I may even have forgotten about this project, the community members do not get to forget about it. The work we do as students, researchers, and collaborators continues to shape the history of the community as it continues to change, and it will play a powerful role in how they will receive future butterflies.

What We Leave Out: Response to Baloy

Margaret Baurley

Like Baloy, I too am a first-time ethnographer, and like Baloy, I have struggled with how to create a relevant end product for community members. After compiling our transcriptions and comparing our findings as a group, we clearly saw that neighborhood history was important to the

neighborhood organization, especially for the elders in the group. Keeping that in mind, we divided our research into various categories, such as housing, businesses, schools, and religious institutions. While this made the material easier to organize and shape, I recall struggling with what we had to leave out. Because we worked most closely with community members active with the neighborhood association, it was difficult for me to come to terms with the fact that our data would not be truly representative of the neighborhood as a whole. While the community association was a tremendous asset, most of its members were homeowners who resided in one particular part of the neighborhood. In contrast, renters tended to live on other blocks that were not as well represented.

Baloy poses several essential questions about why we write ethnographic texts, who we write them for, and how we know when we “get it right.” In the case of Community Heights, our participants answered all these questions for us. They wanted us to create the book *Eastside Story* for them, especially as a keepsake for future generations. They wanted their voices to be heard, and they wanted others to know about their community. When we held a formal book launch in the basement of a local church one weekend, and an animated and diverse crowd of community members descended on the newly printed books and finally held a piece of their

own history in their hands, we knew that for them, we had definitely “got it right.”

Producing Something of Value to the Community:

Response to Anderson

Molly J. Dagon

Like Robin Anderson, we found that we also needed to produce two different products, one for the community and the other for academia. The need to produce different products based on the same research equates to writing in two different languages: one colloquial for the community and one laced with a vocabulary only other anthropologists are likely to recognize. Anderson notes that the two fields “speak two mutually unintelligible dialects.” I found creating the two different products to be refreshing because in writing my academic paper, I was reliving and expanding upon the work we did for *Eastside Story*, and I gained a clearer idea of the importance of our project overall.

For the most part I worked alone while creating my product for an academic audience. I shifted from researching housing in our neighborhood to focusing on the more sensitive topic of the racially restrictive covenants that people had shown us in their original deeds

(though, of course, they were no longer enforceable). Many residents were also disturbed by this aspect of the community's history, but others were very reluctant to discuss this topic. Since I relied on participants for information, the power to share or withhold this information lay with them. I found myself relying mostly on archival sources, like census data and land deeds, to understand this sensitive aspect of the community's history. What I learned is that if one source shuts you off, turn another one on; archival research has power too, and this worked for me. Anderson hits a note that we all should think about while conducting fieldwork: that is, how we decide who controls our final product. I think when we acknowledge the need to produce different products for different audiences, we are able to stand by our work with pride and maintain our own control over the research. This is also an important consideration.

Telling Their Story: Response to Wolowic

Ryan Logan

My experience working with former residents of the Indianapolis Southside neighborhood, through the project we call "The Neighborhood of Saturdays," has shown me just how ethnography has changed through the years. I can see how as students, working collaboratively with this

community, we are writing an ethnography that reflects the perspectives of the people with whom we are working, a view that may be different from our own understandings.

The use of photographs in our work has been instrumental in recording the history of the community. Throughout our time with the Southsiders, our class has organized several “scan-a-thons,” where we invited current and former residents to bring their photos and to wait while we scanned them. Photographs capture the essence of “how things used to be” and really bring the old Southside to life. Jennifer Wolowic describes how pictures revealed the priorities of the Gitxaala youth and their relationships with the world. This idea also rings true for me in my work in Indianapolis. The photographs brought in by the community reveal what was “true” *for them* and what aspects of the neighborhood shaped their lives. Their photographs capture the Southside as they remember it and emphasize how the neighborhood has changed. Wolowic also describes how she and the youth analyzed the photographs collaboratively. Her project turned out to be a “co-authorship among forty teenagers themselves.” Our scan-a-thons have also helped turn all the participants into the co-authors of their collective history.

Most of all, our collaboration has helped to recreate the story of a

neighborhood still treasured by former residents, even though its material presence vanished from our city's current landscape long ago.

Race and Gender in Fieldwork: Response to Gómez-Ramírez

Anne Waxingmoon

I am affirmed in my fieldwork experience by Oralia Gómez-Ramírez's reflection. In our own project "The Neighborhood of Saturdays," I experienced a similar crisis. In one interview an informant expressed sentiments that implied a shared racism, overlooking the nonwhite background of my teammate, and assuming I shared such opinions. In that moment my ethical values as a human being felt confused with my work as an anthropologist. I proceeded with the interview, albeit a bit hastily, and thanked the informant for his time. I felt confused and upset with myself for several days, as my personal background and feelings felt more relevant than did my role as an anthropologist. The informant had reminded me of my own relatives, with whom I have severed relationships for saying such things. Later, in a debriefing session with a classmate, I was reminded that my job as an anthropologist will be rather limited if I preach at every racist whom I end up interviewing. My confidante assured me that I did the right thing in proceeding with the interview rather than excusing

myself. I have not yet fully reconciled this in my mind, but I have a high level of self-awareness about future pitfalls I may encounter in fieldwork.

I am curious about how Gómez-Ramírez responded to her first interviewee's reproduction of "color-blindness" (which would be socially invisible, whereas my informant's comments were more hostile). This experience held fewer consequences for me than Gómez-Ramírez's experience did for her: my informant was not in charge of policy, and I was not researching policy. Nonetheless, as my research could contribute to future policy, indirectly and in ways that I cannot now imagine, I find her three modes of anti-oppressive anthropology to be mandatory for engaging in any form of fieldwork in a "post"-colonial society.

By Way of Conclusion: Finding the Song

David Plasterer

I have always loved music. Through our current ethnographic project, which focuses on documenting the experiences of former Southsiders, I have been able to pursue my interest in the role music plays in community histories. But I was also curious as to how I would be able to produce something of value for the community through music. It was only when we started really meeting with people and seeing how excited they were

about our project, hearing their stories, seeing reunions at our community scan-a-thons, and conducting interviews in people's homes and offices that I began to see the possibilities for incorporating music into our project.

During an interview with a former Southsider who I knew played the guitar, I asked about where people went to listen to live music near the community. As he was attempting to recall certain places, he remembered that he had played "hillbilly music" at a particular tavern with one of his friends. It was as if he had had no recollection of this until that moment, and he admitted that he had not thought of that time in his life for many years. He seemed excited to have retrieved this memory of a forgotten time in his life, and I felt grateful for being able to ask the questions that led him there.

Ethnography in many ways is about interpreting meaning; in symbols, rituals, everyday life, and just about everything else humans do. However, there is often a rift between how the ethnographer and the "ethnographed" interpret meaning. It is this rift between interpretations that forces us to form the "complex allegiances" Anderson addresses. If we want to continue the process of decolonizing anthropology, then examining this rift and seeking to build a new bridge across it—as Menzies, Butler, and their students do—may be a great place to start.

Authors:

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Margaret Baurley, Molly Dagon, Ryan Logan, Marcela Castro Madariaga, David Plasterer, and Anne Waxingmoon were all undergraduates at IUPUI when they participated in the two fieldwork projects described.